

Senate passes bill requiring data on mentally ill patients turned away

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OLYMPIA – The state would find out how many people with mental illness are being turned away from treatment facilities under a bill the Senate passed unanimously Wednesday.

Under the state's Involuntary Treatment Act, mental health professionals can detain a person they believe to be "gravely disabled" or at risk of physical harm.

But hospitals and care centers are often too crowded to accept new patients, leaving many without treatment that experts say they need.

"Testimony indicates that some people are still being turned away without service because there are no beds to be found within the time limit," said Sen. Linda Evans Parlette, the bill's prime sponsor.

The Legislature faces state and federal court orders to provide better treatment for some of Washington's mentally ill. Judges have demanded that hospitals stop "boarding" patients in hallways when there is not enough space to give them proper care.

Lawmakers are considering ways to channel more money into the system.

The legislation would require mental health experts to submit a report to the Department of Social and Health Services within 24 hours after a patient is turned away from a treatment facility.

The department would compile those reports to determine which facilities have the highest patient demand.

Parlette, R-Wenatchee, said the process would help "get the data that we need" to fix the state's faltering mental health care system.

Her bill garnered support from state hospitals and lawyers who represent mental illness patients.

The bill is headed to the House, where it could get a hearing in the coming weeks.

